

# "INCREASE OUR FAITH!"

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**Luke 17:5** *The apostles said to the Lord, "Increase our faith!" [NRSV]*

The apostles came to realize their need of greater faith, when they were faced with the high standards of the New Covenant, which Jesus had just revealed to them.

Jesus had given guidance to the disciples about many different matters of living rightly. He warned them that there would always be temptations to sin and how terrible it will be for the person who is an instrument of temptation. Then Jesus said:

**Luke 17:3–4** *"Be on your guard! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. 4 "And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' forgive him." [NASB]*

The commandment is: **1]** to help our brothers by alerting them about their sins and **2]** to forgive, not gratuitously, but in response to repentance. The forgiveness of God is based on Jesus' atonement and is God's response to man's repentance. So also our forgiveness is how we must respond to repentance.

But how can we have the grace to forgive the same person seven times a day? (And in **Matthew 18**, Jesus made it not just seven, but seventy times seven: a lot.)

The apostles recognized that to do so would be possible only through faith — and faith in a measure that they did not yet have. We are able to forgive that much not because we trust the sinning brother or sister, but because we trust the all-powerful grace of God at work in the repentant heart.

In other words: "It does not matter whether you offend me again and again, because God is in charge and He will make it right — in ways that I cannot fathom."

Thus far, this is a good lesson in itself on the key workings of faith: the kind of miracle that faith can produce. The apostles — recognizing they did not have such faith — did the obvious thing: they asked Jesus for an increase of faith.

So might we, for we are also to meet the high standards of the New Covenant and we do so only by faith: and increasing faith.

Let us now learn from the Lord's answer, which — as it is often the case — is counterintuitive and against our natural understanding: an excellent opportunity to learn spiritual truths and set our carnal or intellectual mind in check.

Jesus' response was in two parts:

**Luke 17:6** *And the Lord said, "If you had faith like a grain of mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and planted in the sea,' and it would obey you." [ESV]*

The first part — in effect — was: yes, you do need an increase of faith, because, if you had even a minimum of faith you would be able to uproot trees and you do not have even that minimum, since you can not uproot the tree.

The second part was:

**Luke 17:7–10** *"Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or keeping sheep say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come at once and recline at table'? 8 Will he not rather say to him, 'Prepare supper for me, and dress properly, and serve me while I eat and drink, and afterward you will eat and drink'? 9 Does he thank the servant because he did what was commanded? 10 So you also, when you have done all that you were commanded, say, 'We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty.'" [ESV]*

This is wholly counterintuitive: what does the condition and duty of the servant have to do with faith? Intellectually nothing, of course: it would appear that Jesus had temporarily lost His train of thought.

This is a test of our spiritual maturity: the intellectual, carnal approach is to conclude that this does not make much sense, it is an incoherent *non-sequitur* and we may as well go on to the next topic, hoping that what God then says will make a little more sense.

The spiritual approach, however, recognizes that Jesus loved the apostles (on another occasion, **Luke 22:32**, He prayed that Peter's faith would not fail) and concludes: "I will trust what Jesus says in response to the earnest request for increased faith. First, I will obey and will do what is commanded of me, without questioning the Lord's logic."

Then, of course, I shall find that Jesus is right.

Thus, the spiritual message is crystal-clear: do I want to have faith? Let me get started by obeying. As I obey my Lord, I shall see my faith increase. Obedience produces faith.

Greater obedience yields increased faith.

This is a simple prescription and everyone can readily follow it: we need to have faith at least as a mustard seed: we shall have it, if we obey and do the things, which are commanded to us (rather than the things that we want for ourselves).

These words of Jesus are a classical application of the well-known teaching:

**Luke 9:23** *Then He said to them all, "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me. [NKJV]*

Another way to understand this is to recognize that faith is a matter of recognizing who is in charge: I (in determining how God operates) or the Lord (in telling me what I should do).

If I choose to obey, I must realize that obedience is not a passive activity, because the servant of Jesus' saying had to apply himself immediately to put on suitable clothes and to "prepare the meal": fetch the food, fix it, cook it and serve it.

To live by faith does not mean to pray idly in a corner, waiting for the Lord to do my job. Rather it is a matter of recognizing who is in charge of my life, of obeying Him and then applying my skills, resources and gifts to being a good and profitable servant and accomplishing His will.

**Matthew 25:22-23** *"Also the one who had received the two talents came up and said, 'Master, you entrusted two talents to me. See, I have gained two more talents.' 23 His master said to him, 'Well done, good and faithful slave. You were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' [NASB]*

A key part of our growing in the knowledge of God is to recognize what is His responsibility and what is our job; what He will do and what we must do and never mix up the two.

God's priority is to glorify Himself and establish His will by showing His love for us; our priority is to grow in the knowledge of Him. Obedience is the means whereby our will and His will become united and His will is done. Faith is not only believing that God is; rather it is being one with Him.

The test of faith is that, after recognizing what it is that is our responsibility to do and what is God's, we do our part — all along having enough trust in God to believe that He will do His part. So that we do not take short cuts, when it seems to us that God does not do His part on our schedule.

In the words of Edward Mote's hymn, *The Solid Rock*: "He then is all my Hope and Stay; On Christ the solid Rock I stand."

In conclusion: a practical way to remember the Lord's lesson is that we are to "Trust the Lord and use our brain"; not "Trust our brain (science, government, statistics, etc.) and use the Lord ('please Lord, give us this and that so that we may achieve our goals and desires')".